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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that examined how six women headteachers in Great Britain worked as school leaders. Data were obtained through observation, joint inquiry, structured conversations, and life-history interviews. The study drew on Wallace and Hall's (1994) power-culture metaphor, which stated that individuals make different use of resources to achieve desired goals through interaction according to their beliefs and values. The study looked at how the women heads attempted to influence and direct the organizational cultures for which they were responsible. Findings indicate that each of the heads "grew into" the headship. They held clear values, preferred influence over power, and utilized effective interpersonal and communication skills. They viewed their own empowerment as enabling them to empower others. Constraints to creating a supportive learning environment included gender, staff resistance, and changing external demands. The findings do not assert that women are better leaders than men, but show how the women headteachers' visions and more conducive to the development of schools as learning organizations. Contains 21 references. (LMI)

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Making a difference: women headteachers' contribution to schools as learning institutions

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Introduction

This paper is based on interim findings of an interpretive study of six women headteachers (Hall, forthcoming). It attempts to bring together some of what we know about organizational learning and leadership, viewed from the perspective of women who lead schools. The overall aims of the Leverhulme-funded research project are to show how women go about different management tasks, how they interpret their behaviour and the values that underpin it, and how their values and behaviour as headteachers relates to their childhood experiences through to their present stage of career. The methodology uses observation, joint enquiry, structured conversations and biography to construct a picture of 'the female world of school administration' (Shakeshaft, 1989).

It thus provides a range of evidence not collected before in Britain about the ways in which women lead and manage schools. The basic claim of this paper of a possible relationship between women heads' leadership styles and learning cultures can only be speculative. The study is small scale but, assuming that the six women heads are not totally unrepresentative, they might be seen to reflect broadly how women work as school leaders. The resonances with findings about women leaders and managers in non-educational settings in Britain and the United States are considerable (eg Astin and Leland, 1991; Marshall, 1984; Coleman, 1991).

Using power to create cultures

The theoretical framework which underpins the study provides a way of understanding how women heads, within constraints, attempt to influence and direct the organizational cultures for which they are responsible. It draws on the power-culture metaphor developed by Wallace and Hall (1994) in their recently completed work on school Senior Management Teams (SMTs). The starting point for Wallace and Hall's dual perspective is 'the assumption that individuals make different use of resources to achieve desired goals through interaction according to their beliefs and values which they share to a greater or lesser extent with others, and of which they have only partial awareness' (p27).

By virtue of their legal authority as heads, women heads have a formal power which women managers in other organizations have less frequently. Combined with influence, they are in a position to define cultural norms as well as be defined by them. The interest lies in the kinds of cultures they shape, and the methods they use as, through their leadership role, they work towards changing schools in order to improve children's educational experience. Other research in non-educational settings (eg Hearn and Sheppard, 1989) suggests that the experience of women in organizations is different from that of men and that the beliefs and values underpinning their behaviour may also be different. Since this study of women heads does not compare them with men, it does not claim differences or no differences. The claims are based on data about women only.

An alternative model for supporting learning

From a 'learning institution' perspective the most striking finding is that there appears to be a consistency between the women heads' espoused theory (which they claim to follow) and theory in use (which can be inferred from their actions). This raises the question of whether Argyris' (1992) model of defensive reasoning is as valid when women are at work. His claim of an almost universal discrepancy between professionals' espoused theories and theories in use is based on research into a predominantly male population. The model for defensive reasoning that emerges is antipathetic to organizational learning and closely resembles models developed in other contexts to describe 'masculine' behaviour, ie unilateral control has priority, playing to win is the rule, negative feelings must be suppressed, rationality takes precedence over the affective. In contrast, the model that emerges from a study of the female world of administration is one in which joint definition of purposes and openness are valued; only winners is the aim, and intuition and feelings are valued as well as rationality.

The heads in the study demonstrate a realistic assessment of their performance, as a result of their continuing attention to self-development and critical examination of their theories-in-use. In this respect they may differ from other women teachers who choose to remain predominantly in the classroom. What is striking about their career paths to headship is how they all 'grew' into the job. Others have written about the need to re-define teacher careers to take account of women's experiences in the profession (e.g. Evetts, 1990). Each of the six heads only applied for headship when they felt confident, not that they would get the job but that they could do it well, if their application was successful. Growing into power in this way gave them a confidence that they would be able to manage both themselves in the job and others in a way that would make a difference.

It is important to them to be clear about their own values. Having 'grown into' headship and a sense of readiness to run a school, once in post they jealously guard opportunities to retreat into privacy, for calm, reflection and preparation, in the few waking hours that remain to them outside the school's working day. For all, knowing and being in control of oneself and the situation are seen as necessary prerequisites to supporting other's self-knowledge and autonomy. They continuously refer to being thoroughly prepared, listening actively and giving praise, as necessary characteristics of their approach to the job. Observation confirmed the frequency of these actions. They value having influence more than having power. They recognise and prefer the potency of influence to the overt and covert instrumentality of power as a political or micropolitical weapon. For all, power requires caution, is too easily abused, is uncomfortable, unjustified and can harm. For one secondary head:

> *Well I was the most powerful person in the world from the moment that I stepped into a classroom. I think all the power that's invested in you as a head is merely transposed from the classroom. There is no greater power than the privilege of having a child in front of you and you can usurp that in the same way as you can with colleagues ... In terms of power I am obviously interested in it but it is not the be-all and end-all for me. I am far more about wanting to work with people on the affinity side than I am interested in being a powerful head.*

Similarly, a primary head claimed:

> *I also recognise how much power I have got to make people's lives miserable. They could go home from here and I could make them feel miserable. I don't think I have ever done that and I think that the day I do I would dislike myself so much I would want to opt out. So I am aware of the power and I really do try not to use it, but I have to know that I have got it for good or bad.... This could sound conceited but I think I stand back in the position I am in as a head and because I think about everything that that means I feel the people I work with are actually quite lucky that it is me in that position because I do not feel I use that power negatively.*

The use of influence to achieve desired ends is manifest in how they communicate with others, how they motivate and how they give feedback. Their styles rely greatly on self-awareness and on interpersonal and communication skills.

This model comes close to that advocated by Hargreaves (1994) and Fullan (1993), in their re-working of the change models that have dominated educational management for the last decade. Both talk of the need for a new 'mindset' in a post-modern age. Hargreaves comments 'many ways of knowing, thinking and being moral, not just rational 'logical' ones, are coming to be seen as legitimate, not least the knowledge and moral judgement of women' (p28). Similarly Fullan's 'new mindset for change' requires a recognition of education's moral purpose ('to make a difference in the lives of students regardless of background, and to help produce citizens who can live and work productively in increasingly dynamically complex societies' p4), combined with the necessary skills to make it a reality. Findings from the study suggest that the women heads' 'mindsets'

appear to be appropriate to the demands of managing schools in post ERA, post-modern times, for the reasons Hargreaves and Fullan identify.

Creating a supportive climate for learning

An analysis of the values held by the women heads about power and its use, competition and collaboration, leadership and management shows a commitment to empowering self and others, to encouraging collaboration and modelling leadership. Observation of their behaviour reveals the link between these values (which are rooted, their biographies reveal, in their experiences of growing up as girls and women) and how they communicate, motivate, make decisions and develop themselves, staff and the school as a whole. The life-history interviews revealed a common moral purpose for both entering teaching and going for headship; the desire to make a difference, to make things happen. They rise to the challenge of headship precisely because they see it as an opportunity to put into practice principles that they value. They welcome power for the opportunity it provides to implement their vision.

There are, of course, constraints on their attempts to translate their espoused theories into action. The paper is not claiming that they are necessarily successful, although all six schools are 'successful' by a number of criteria. Gender is just one of these constraints. It is notable that for at least four of the six heads, a major constraint on operationalizing a collaborative approach to management came from men not women. If, as Argyris appears to show, men are more likely to engage in defensive reasoning, the fact that the majority of the women heads' senior colleagues are men (even in primary schools) may increase the likelihood of this problem. Others (eg Gray, 1987:297) have pointed to the difficulties some men may have in moving out of 'masculine paradigms of management behaviour'.

Other constraints on their attempts to create a supportive learning environment come from parent, governor and staff expectations, the school's location and changing external demands. Candy (1991:337) describes a supportive climate for learning as one characterised by 'low threat, unconditional positive regard, honest and open feedback, respect for the ideas and opinions of others, approval of self-improvement as a goal, collaboration rather than competition'. The heads observed both intend and enact consistently most of these behaviours. The constraints limiting their impact are most apparent in their attempts to work collaboratively both within and between schools and colleges. The blocks to successful collaboration are mainly from staff whom the heads did not appoint and from schools seeing each other as rivals not partners. The problem for the heads is that these blocks, particularly those within the school, threaten the whole learning enterprise because they are based on values that are antipathetic to those which drive the head's 'vision'.

Their difficulties raise the issue of how far school leaders can shape the school environment and combat those factors which challenge 'learning organization' approaches. Just as some teachers prefer not to collaborate (and resist the means heads use for making them do so) so not everyone wants work to be about continuous learning. The same passionate ideals that drive the heads, based on their own preferences for life and workstyles may alienate those with different priorities, both men and women. All the heads aim continuously to model the behaviour they see as desirable for others but thereby potentially create a distance from others as a result of the high (and for some different) standards they set for themselves. Sergiovanni (1991:116) cites Kanter's claim that the consequences of not providing people with opportunity and of not sharing power are damaging both personally and organizationally. Even though the women heads are observed to provide opportunity and share power, there remain some staff who resemble those Kanter sees as denied these two commodities. As a result they:

> *tend to limit their aspirations, have lower self-esteem, seek satisfactions outside of work, are critical of management, are less likely to seek changes, openly preferring to gripe informally and to stir the undercurrent, steer peer groups toward*

defensiveness and self-protection, emphasize social relationships over tasks, be more parochial, become complacent, and become concerned with survival and economic security rather than intrinsic aspects of job. Persons who view themselves as being low in power tend to encourage and promote low morale, be critical, behave in authoritarian ways over their own charges, seek to gain and retain control, discourage growth and opportunities of subordinates, be more insecure, and protect turf. It's pretty hard to imagine quality schooling emerging from principals, teachers, and parents who harbour these feelings and possess these characteristics.

The reality is that some teachers and parents do harbour these feelings and possess these characteristics, in spite of the heads' attempts to provide opportunity and share power.

Empowering self, empowering others

The paper has not set out to claim that women are better than men at creating learning institutions, even though Fullan (1991:163) points to evidence suggesting that as a group women are more likely to demonstrate behaviour associated with effective leadership. Similarly Rothschild (quoted in Fullan, 1993:74) concludes that women's socialization prepares them better to lead complex settings of continuous change. She claims, 'women tend more than men to negotiate conflict in ways that protect on-going working relationships (as compared to seeing conflict in win/lose terms) and they tend to value relationships in and of themselves as part of their commitment to care (rather than seeing relationships as instrumental to other purposes)'.

In Britain, Jenkins (1991:165) suggests that the failure of school leaders (of both sexes) to adopt the 'feminine' characteristics of tolerance, sympathy and understanding, and the tendency instead to assume the 'masculine' attributes of competitiveness and insensitivity is a major concern. As he also admits there is almost no research evidence to support such claims to 'masculine' and 'feminine' leadership characteristics and cultures.

Fullan (1991:164) rightly questions any exclusive association of effective school leadership with women. Similarly, by contributing a gender perspective, this project and paper claim only to extend our understanding of school leadership and learning, not to say women are different or better. It can only hypothesise that how women lead schools may make a difference. It is significant that all six women in the study (three primary and three secondary headteachers) took over their present schools around the time of the 1988 Education Reform Act. They attribute some of their success in attaining headship (in view of the continued under-representation of women in senior management posts in schools) to selectors' associations of what they perceive as women's leadership styles with what is required in today's schools. It has now become almost a cliché that the desired management style in organizations is female. Yet Blackmore and Kenway (1993:43) rightly question whether the appropriation by corporate culture of characteristics seen to be feminine is a real reconceptualisation or still hegemonic masculinity.

It is perhaps paradoxical that women's potentially special contribution to organizational leadership (Jenkins' 'feminine' characteristics) is being solicited at the same time as schools are increasingly driven by market forces. Findings from the study show how the six women heads encourage collaboration within the school in order to compete successfully externally (Hall and Wallace, 1993). Budgetary control, school development plans, appraisal and OFSTED inspections are seen by them not as threats but as opportunities to enhance the school's strengths. Their own interpretation of their beliefs and actions is that external demands can be harnessed in the main to the school's benefit (with the possible exception of Standard Assessment Tasks). For one head her role as facilitator of the school as a learning organization is about:

.... having the capacity to make people feel good about themselves, feeling able to take risks, being as natural as possible with each other, being comfortable and

having trust. That's one thing that OFSTED has done for which I am eternally grateful. It has allowed me to say things like this bluntly, to stress that with OFSTED coming in we must be prepared to back each other up. And they are all agreeing. OFSTED has bound us together.

Rather than facilitating externally imposed action in the workplace, they see themselves as empowered by government reforms to empower others. Their conception of empowerment, like their concept of power, incorporates a commitment to authenticity, autonomy and enlightened self interest and a rejection of power as covert manipulation (Block, 1987:20). Being empowered themselves has enabled them to achieve headship and the power that potentially brings to live by ideals and empower others. Empowerment, in turn, is a fundamental characteristic of the learning organization in which managers need to model commitment to learning and self development. The heads' willingness to take part in this project bears witness to their desire and ability to reflect on their performance, to hold it up to scrutiny and to learn from the results. The nature of the methodology (encouraging introspection, linking of the personal and professional, exploration of emotions as well as strategies) encourages the type of reflection which takes the heads to the heart of their work: what motivates them to do what they do.

Conclusions

Fullan (1993:23) suggests 'you can't mandate what matters'. Yet in modelling, supporting and reinforcing principles and behaviour that are part of their own vision for effective leadership and effective schools, these heads are, in effect, carrying out their chosen mandate, albeit in the service of externally conceived mandates. They are firm about what kind of behaviour (child or adult) is acceptable and what is not. They work hard on creating working conditions to support learning and development. They have a 'vision' of where the school should be going and what it needs to do to get there. The contradiction is that, although they as women heads embody many of the characteristics of the 'new mindset' to which Fullan refers, their interpretation of their brief and mission, on taking over the school, included providing a map for the uncharted new territories created by the 1988 Education Reform Act. Fullan argues that the head's vision can inhibit rather than encourage change. This paper has tried to show some of the features of the maps drawn up by women headteachers, their resemblance to many of the characteristics of learning organizations and the inevitable obstacles on the journey itself. What is needed now is more research on school leadership in Britain which takes gender as a variable (to include men and women) and explores the source and impact of personal values and professional socialisation on heads' capacities to transform schools into successful learning institutions for all. If there is any truth in the hypothesis that the characteristics of women as school leaders are more conducive to the development of schools as learning organizations, then questions are raised about why more women are not being promoted to management posts in schools. What are the implications for selection and training? Perhaps the wisest strategy for new men heads seeking to spend their 'induction vouchers' might be to shadow an experienced woman head and discover whether her style makes a difference.

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